

Citizens Advice in Dorset

Impact Report

Responding To Crisis

2022 - 23



Dorset

About us

Citizens Advice in Dorset (CAiD) is a consortium of three local Citizens Advice charities in the Dorset council area, which provide free, confidential and impartial advice to help people find a way forward, whatever problems they face.

We ensure that people in the Dorset Council area have access to the best possible advice services by promoting the work of Citizens Advice, and by supporting the development and growth of the service.

We provide face to face advice from our main offices and a number of outreaches as well as advice by phone, email, letter, videoconferencing, online and webchat.

Citizens Advice in Dorset comprises the three local Citizens Advice of Bridport and District, Central Dorset, and East Dorset and Purbeck.

Our aims

- To provide the advice people need for the problems they face
- To improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives

Our principles

- Free
- Confidential
- Independent
- Impartial

Contact us

www.citizensadvisedorset.org.uk

Bridport and District www.bridportca.org.uk

Central Dorset www.centraldorsetca.org.uk

East Dorset and Purbeck www.edpcitizensadvice.org.uk

Dorset Adviceline freephone 0800 144 8848, textphone 0800 144 8884,
Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm



@CitAdviceDorset | @BridportCAB | @WPCAB | @WestDorsetCAB | @CitAdviceEDP



@CitAdviceEDP | @citizens-advice-bridport-district

Chair's Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to introduce and commend the Impact Report of Citizens Advice in Dorset (CAiD) for the year ending March 2023. The review illustrates the activities of the three Local Citizen Advice (LCA) offices in the Dorset Council area – Bridport, Central Dorset and East Dorset and Purbeck.

2022/23 has been another challenging year with the following strands running throughout the year – the pandemic/cost of living crisis, the Dorset Council Information Advice and Guidance Contract and governance arrangements.

The Chief Officers' report covers in detail how the service has managed and changed in the provision of advice in these challenging times. Our involvement with Dorset Council and the role CAiD has played with other agencies during the pandemic/cost of living crisis has been very successful. The Central Dorset Chief Officer continues to attend regular weekly meetings with Dorset Council officers and other voluntary and statutory sector organisations which enabled us to assist and support Dorset Council in achieving its objectives.

CAiD was awarded the Dorset Council Information Advice and Guidance Contract initially for a three-year period and 2022/23 was the first full year of the contract. A Contract Monitoring Sub Committee monitors progress against the contract every quarter with six-monthly review meetings being held with Dorset Council which have been extremely positive.

A Task & Finish Group was established to review the Articles of Association and introduce governance arrangements which reflected the enhanced way of working between the three LCAs. Each LCA nominated two Trustees to the board and all the business will be conducted at the main board rather than through Sub Committees thereby reducing the workload of Trustees and providing a more efficient governance structure. This work was completed after the year's end with an EGM being called to adopt the revised Articles of Association.

Finally, National Citizens Advice (NCA) require CAiD to complete an annual Leadership Self-Assessment which is reviewed by NCA against laid down criteria followed by a review meeting. It was another excellent result with top scores in all areas which reflects and builds on the progress made over the last three years.

An essential element of partnership working is to identify the needs of residents at an early stage and there is no doubt that Citizens Advice is well placed to understand the priorities for local people. Once again additional funding was received from Dorset Council to support various Council initiatives which highlights the importance of Citizens Advice in helping deliver Council objectives.

The Trustees express their thanks to the Chief Officers and the volunteers and staff for all their hard work during the year and ensuring that Citizen's Advice has remained key to the future of advice services.

Alan Breakwell
Chair of Trustees

Chief Officers' Overview

Responding To Crisis

Sadly, the cost of living crisis worsened further in 2022-23 with a number of economic factors compounding the problem: inflation rose to a high of 9.6% in October 2022 and remained around 9% until the end of the financial year. Bank interest rates also started to increase during the year significantly and we saw average gas and electricity prices at their highest level in August.

Citizens Advice is on the front line of the crisis. Our advisers are seeing more people approach us for crisis support whether that is for assistance with food bank referrals, charitable support and discretionary schemes like the Household Support Fund, or help to top-up pre-payment meters to avoid self-disconnection. Our advisers helped people with more problems this year in relation to energy, benefits, debt and housing issues.

Housing affordability and lack of access to affordable housing continues to be a major concern. For the lowest income households who rely on some support with their housing costs the rates determining how much help you can get when renting from a private landlord have been frozen since April 2020, despite rising rents. The Dorset and BCP Energy Unit has been incredibly busy with complex energy issues that people need help to resolve and you can learn about this in their report.

The service has responded to these numerous challenges in various ways: we continued to improve access to advice and services for the most disadvantaged, for example; through new outreaches working in partnership with local foodbanks or community libraries, inclusive services for Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, Ukrainian and refugee support, a Special Educational Needs and Disability advice pilot and developing the advice bus model to reach more rural communities.

We have developed new roles (volunteer co-ordinator, trainee legal advisers) or bolstered existing core volunteer-led services with the addition of paid staff (for example on the Adviceline telephone) to help cope with the demand and increasing complexity of the problems clients are contacting us about, to improve the resilience of the teams, and to support well-being in the workplace.

We have worked closely with a wide range of partners to ensure people get access to the most appropriate advice when they need it. Our single point of contact for third parties to easily refer vulnerable clients to us has proved successful with numbers of referrals continuing to grow.

Citizens Advice campaign on the issues that affect our clients and we challenge inequality and injustice. You can read about some of our campaign initiatives in the report. We are grateful to our partners, Dorset Council, local Councillors and MPs for engaging with and supporting us on these cost of living campaign issues and providing additional resources to help manage the crisis.

Rovarn Wickremasinghe
Chief Officer
Citizens Advice Bridport and District

Daniel Cadisch
Chief Officer
Citizens Advice Central Dorset

Helen Goldsack
Chief Officer
Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck

In 2022-23
Citizens Advice in Dorset
gave advice:



⁰⁵
to 15,130* clients



on 59,853 issues

Top issues:



**Benefits, tax credits
& Universal Credit**
21,183



Debt
5,941



**Charitable support &
Universal Credit**
7,477



Housing
4,839



**Utilities/
communications**
7,254



**Consumer goods
& services**
2,163



**£9,110,931 - Financial outcome: income gains
including additional benefits awarded**

£1,181,632 - Financial outcome: debts written off

**£1,046,320 - Financial outcome: other including
charitable grants and food parcels**

Spotlight on...

Energy Unit Dorset & BCP

We've received a high number of requests for support from our energy unit this year – a result of the unstable energy market. The Government introduced the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG), however, households are still struggling to manage their energy costs.

We've experienced high demand for emergency pre-payment meter (PPM) vouchers to get households 'back on supply.' Our team continued to give practical energy advice and carbon monoxide awareness training whilst offering free CO monitors to people.

We've seen the number of energy issues increase and become more complex, which in turn takes longer to resolve. The energy advice we have been giving has constantly been reviewed with the changing markets and tailored to the household's needs and lifestyle, ensuring our advice is current. Added to this, many energy companies ceased trading during this time, which caused further stress and anxiety for households when trying to manage their energy costs.

Our advisers have had access to emergency PPM vouchers, from our partners at the Fuel Bank Foundation and have been able to assist with applications for the Government's Household Support Fund and Surviving Winter Grants.

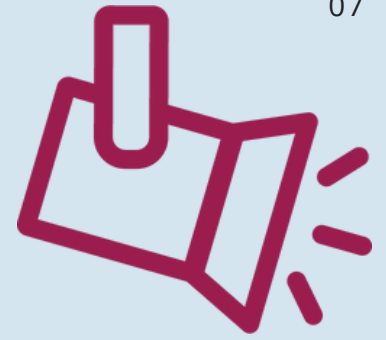
We received funding for the Regional Lead and the Energy Champions for consumers again. The Regional Lead offered Frontline Worker Training for professionals who engage with the general public, to give them a better understanding of the energy market and the extra support available to households. The Energy Champions attended events to speak to consumers directly offering simple energy advice. We attended events in Bridport, Ferndown, Wareham Quay and Swanage and hosted our own event in Ferndown for Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, which was extremely well supported and beneficial to the many people who attended.

We increased the number of Surviving Winter Grants that were given out to households across Dorset and BCP to 506. This has been made possible by the amazing fund raising support from Dorset Community Foundation, which enabled local Citizens Advice offices across Dorset & BCP Council areas to access the grants.

Ros Dignan
Project Coordinator

Spotlight on...

Single Point of Contact (SPOC)



The single point of email contact service for third parties to make direct client referrals by email to Citizens Advice in Dorset (CAiD) was established in 2021 following set-up project funding from Dorset Council and is now part of our core service. It enables organisations to refer clients who may not be able to access our services through the usual channels themselves, often because they are vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way.

We received 263 referrals in 2022-23 and numbers continue to increase: in the first 6 months of this financial year, we have seen a 57% increase over the same period in 2022-23 with the average number of referrals at just over 30 per month.

We attempt to contact clients on at least three occasions by telephone following a referral and once contact has been made a client is offered a comprehensive triage interview establishing their needs and capabilities. If further advice is needed they may be referred on for follow up work with their local Citizens Advice office in Dorset.

Clients can be referred to us for help about a range of different issues, but the top three enquiry areas for referrals are benefits, debt and housing problems. Referral partners include Dorset Council, local food banks, the NHS and Steps to Wellbeing.

Kristina Zadunaiskaja
SPOC Project Worker

Spotlight on...

Ukrainian Refugee Project



It has now been over a year since we started our Ukrainian Refugee Project at Citizens Advice. Working closely with our partner organisations across Dorset, we have provided support, advice, workshops and webinars to our Ukrainian guests on a wide range of issues including housing, immigration, benefits, and employment.

Dorset is now home to a thriving Ukrainian community with a number of Ukrainian-run businesses, Ukrainian craft and food markets from Blandford to Weymouth and regular large-scale Ukrainian events that are enjoyed by locals and Ukrainians alike. There are now over 283 Ukrainians in private rented accommodation and hundreds in full-time employment.

Since the start of the project, there have been shifts in the types of queries we have received. Initially, the majority of questions were around Biometric Residence Permits, making Ukrainian cars UK road legal, converting Ukrainian driving licences, understanding and applying for Universal Credit and Pension Credit, finding employment, navigating the benefits system, resolving issues with sponsor families, and understanding which local organisations did what.

Over time, queries mirrored the changing situation as families began to look for more permanent accommodation and more stable employment. By February 2023, we were seeing more queries around housing, renting, buying property, tax, self-employment, and converting Ukrainian qualifications to British ones. This suggested that the situation had stabilised somewhat. There was a drop in new families arriving and priorities shifted to long-term planning. Some families moved to other counties and some even returned to Ukraine. Today, the majority of queries are around housing, access to benefits, and employment.

In August 2023, we began a new Ukrainian Employment Project headed by Sarah Campbell with the aim of providing tailored employment support to Ukrainians to find more meaningful employment. This project came about because we were seeing many highly-skilled clients in entry-level employment. This project has proven to be very successful and we are confident that it will continue to be so.

As an organisation, we have learnt a lot from this project. Our local offices have had to get to grips with new ways of working to meet the increased demand and deal with Ukrainian-specific queries. For example, our volunteers have become adept at using technology to assist with translation. As Ukrainian-specific legislation has evolved, we also have acted quickly to ensure the community is aware of the changes. The government's welcome decision to extend the validity of Ukrainian driving licences for three years and the recent 50% Council Tax reduction are cases in point.

As the war enters its 21st month, Citizens Advice continues to support the Ukrainian community. We regularly run workshops, support clients in local offices, conduct home visits, and contribute to webinars and information guides on issues such as housing and employment. Regular meetings with our colleagues at Dorset Council, Help & Kindness, Skills & Learning and others across Dorset keep us up-to-date with the latest trends in the community and allow us to respond quickly to new issues as they arise.

Thomas Hensher
Ukrainian Refugee Specialist Coordinator

Spotlight on...

Refugee Resettlement Project



It has been a busy year for our Refugee Resettlement Project with a number of new families from Afghanistan arriving in Dorset. Together with our colleagues at Dorset Council we have welcomed these families and helped them begin their new lives here.

There are a number of practicalities involved in the immediate resettlement process and it requires us to work closely with the Council's Resettlement team to ensure we are providing the families with the best possible start. Initial steps from our side involve setting up utilities, setting up Council Tax, setting up direct debits for rent, applying for Universal Credit, and applying for Child Benefit. Secondary steps involve, for example, support with budgeting, dealing with immigration queries, applications for reduced utility tariffs, employment advice, applications for charitable grants, and food bank referrals. After the basics have been covered, we provide ongoing support on a range of topics such as housing, family problems, consumer issues, debt, and benefits.

The new families from Afghanistan have been adapting well to their new lives in the UK. Their children are enjoying school and their parents are attending English language courses. Many of them have already found stable employment. This year one Syrian family successfully left the project after five years working closely with our team and they are now being supported by their local CA office. This was a positive result for everyone involved and we are confident that the family will continue to thrive. There have also been some real challenges, for example we have had to act quickly to avert homelessness on two occasions.

As new refugees continue to arrive in Dorset, we are ready to welcome and support them. We now have a lot of experience with refugee resettlement and are confident that we can deal with any issue that is likely to arise.

Thomas Hensher
Refugee Caseworker

Spotlight on...

Research and Campaigns



One of the twin aims of our service is to exercise a responsible influence on policies and practices that adversely impact our clients. Our activities are evidence-led and based on the issues clients seek advice on, our extensive case data and case study examples.

The Dorset Research and Campaigns group provides a forum for the three local offices to coordinate and discuss joint and local office campaigning work.

In 2022-23 our research and campaign work included the following:

- Dorset-wide media promotion of National Scams Awareness Week.
- Coordinated briefings to Dorset MPs and engagement meetings on the rising numbers of people presenting to us with crisis support needs and cost of living issues. Specific campaign 'asks' included suspending the planned April 2023 Energy Price Cap increase and energy suppliers forced installations of pre-payment meters (with the associated risks of self-disconnection) while the matter was reviewed by Ofgem.
- East Dorset and Purbeck CA report on social housing tenant's problems relating to the energy efficiency and fabric of their home and recommendations for landlords.
- Central Dorset CA report on the types of employment issues faced by workers in the care sector who consulted the Dorset CA Employment Unit and suggestions for improved working practices and better awareness of employment rights and options amongst care workers.
- Bridport and District CA successful negotiations with the DWP to introduce a vulnerable claimant's policy for Universal Credit claims in the local Jobcentre.
- Regular input and engagement with Dorset Council Cost of Living meetings.

Rovarn Wickremasinghe

Chair Dorset Research and Campaigns Group

Spotlight on...

Advice Bus



Many Dorset residents are unable to access services due to rural isolation, restricted mobility, cost of fuel or limited access to public transport. Our Advice Bus provides vulnerable Dorset residents with access to free advice and support which is making a big difference to rural communities.

Our advisers on the bus provide a holistic advice service including crisis support, food bank referrals, fuel bank vouchers to stop energy supply disconnection and information about eligibility for charitable grants. They can also offer income maximisation advice, help with benefits applications, financial reliance, budgeting and assistance with housing issues. To enable us to get the bus on the road and branded with the Citizens Advice messaging, we raised the initial funding via an Aviva Crowdfunding appeal which raised just over £12,000. We secured additional funding from Wessex Water and the National Lottery, as well as smaller local donations. We are grateful for all the support we have received so far.



Helen Goldsack
Chief Officer
Citizens Advice in East Dorset and Purbeck

Our team

**240 volunteers
generously
give their time
each week...**



**..the value of
volunteering
across the
Dorset Council
area in
2022/23 was
£1,350,906**



**We have
100 paid staff**



**Volunteering
benefits our
volunteers
socially, mental
wellbeing, fun,
fulfillment, job
training**



**... and 31
Trustees bring
their expertise
and
knowledge to
oversee our
work**

Kate's Story

Kate lived alone with her four children, one of which was under five years old, in a three-bed house rented from a housing association. Kate suffered from various health conditions including fibromyalgia.

Kate received Universal Credit and was being assessed for Work Capability Assessment, Child Benefit, Personal Independence Payment daily living element and child maintenance. She came to see us worried about her high energy costs. She had various debts and was receiving debt advice from the Debt Advice Agency.

We established that Kate was not on the Priority Services Register and that she believed her main heating system, an Air Source Heat Pump and solar panels was not working properly and she did not understand how to use it. When it was installed earlier in the year she was told the property needed new windows and doors but the housing association have not actioned this.

Kate was also unsure about whether she had the right amount of loft insulation. Kate had a standard pre-payment meter which she was topping up by £70 a week in the summer when no heating was being used.

Outcome

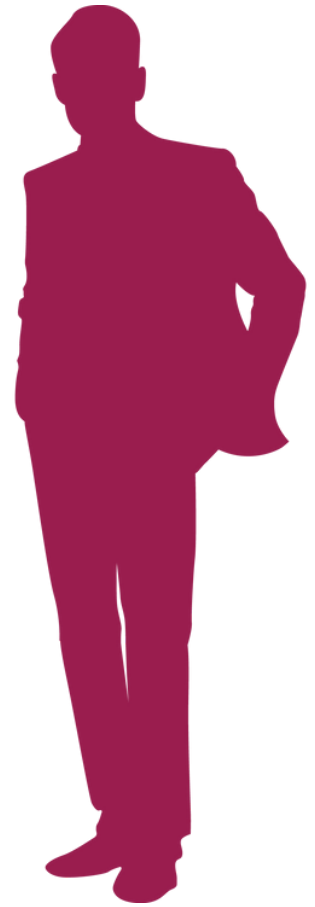
- Kate was offered a benefit check and referred to a Citizens Advice specialist for more complex benefit issues. We provided Kate with some initial energy savings tips and referred her to LEAP (Local Energy Advice Partnership) for a free home visit, to help identify where Kate could reduce her energy costs further.
- In addition, we advised Kate to talk to her housing association to request an engineer's visit to check the system and discuss how to use heating system to reduce electric costs. We also advised her to write to the housing association to confirm the level of loft insulation and to follow up on replacement windows and doors.
- We also helped Kate to apply for the Warm Home Discount (£150 credit) and told her about the benefits of registering with the Priority Service register, providing a direct link for her to apply. We told Kate about the cost of living payments she was eligible for, including £650 as a Universal Credit claimant; £150 as a PIP claimant and the all household £400 credit through her energy supplier.



Simon's Story

We helped Simon with an appeal for an increased award of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to include the mobility component which was successful. During work on the appeal, the adviser noticed that Simon was not receiving a Severe Disability Premium as part of his Employment and Support Allowance award following a routine benefit check. He should have been getting this premium when he was first awarded PIP (daily living component) in 2017. We helped Simon request that this premium be added to his ESA with the appropriate backdating.

As a result, our client received £19,000 in arrears and an extra £70 per in his ESA award going forward.



Sue's Story

Sue came to the foodbank as she had no income and needed help with overpayments to DWP. Sue's husband had recently died and had dealt with all their finances and she needed help to know what to do.

Our caseworker immediately identified that she should be applying for a state pension, the letter had arrived before her husband's death but she had not progressed it. Our triage worker gave Sue the number to call to apply. Our triage worker then helped the client fill out a form for personal representatives so that Sue could gain access to the bank account. A food parcel was given to help Sue out immediately, as she had no money until her state pension came in and she had access to the bank account.

Our triage worker also noticed an unpaid direct debit; she took time to trace the company and discovered it was a life insurance policy.

Sue has now followed up on all actions identified by our triage worker. Sue's state pension is now in place, and the insurance company has paid her. Overpayments made to husband by DWP are being addressed. No further use of the foodbank is required.

Ian's Story

Ian is a vulnerable client with significant learning disabilities and physical disabilities. He came to the foodbank as he was in debt to the council as his care plan was too expensive for him to be able to afford, and there were questions about the type and amount of care being provided. Upon investigation, it transpired that there were also problems with his PIP payments, which had been stopped as Ian had not responded to a review form. As a result, his severe disability premium was also suspended. Our caseworker helped our client to fill in the review form and managed to get both PIP and his premium reinstated.

We are still investigating and challenging the debt to the council and the cost of the care plan.

Nicki's Story

Nicki first approached a Foodbank outreach in Autumn of 2022. She had recently moved into a property she owns, with her daughter. Nicki is profoundly deaf and relies on lip reading. This means she cannot make phone calls.

At the initial meeting, Nicki needed help in setting up payment for her water bills. The caseworker spoke with Wessex Water and put Nicki on the Priority Services Register, and arranged for Wessex Water to contact Nicki via email or text so a visit could be arranged to establish if she had a water meter, and to set up her payments. Nicki then sought further advice on setting up the bills for her new home, as many of the utility companies were inaccessible to her.

As part of this ongoing work, the caseworker supported Nicki in checking she was receiving all the benefits to which she was entitled to, and ensured her income was maximised. We also helped Nicki to apply for Household Support Fund grants.

Since then, Nicki has visited the caseworker on numerous occasions for support that often stems from companies being inaccessible to the client via the telephone. She now has ongoing support dealing with utility issues, debt, and the property management company and remains able to engage with our service.



Clients say...

"Everyone involved made me feel like I had done things correctly and helped to get my situation resolved. A big thank you to all involved"

"My first visit was so supportive and helpful, that I left my appointment full of hope and able to face the future."

"I have found this service invaluable for advice and moral support when things in my life were unravelling and I didn't have the emotional stability or knowledge necessary to deal with the situation."

THANK
YOU

"You are my heroes. I have a chronic illness and for the last six yrs your staff have supported me when there was no one else."

"This is a valuable service and I would most probably be homeless and my mental and physical health would have suffered immensely."

"As a result of a stroke, I struggle to fill in forms and retain information. I needed help and received so much help"

“ ”

Thank you to our supporters

Councils

Dorset Council and all supporting Parish and Town Councils across the Dorset Council area

Project-funding

Access to Justice Foundation
Dorset Community Foundation
Henry Smith
Macmillan Cancer Care
Money Advice Service
National Lottery
Nationwide
NHS
The Energy Saving Trust
The Trussell Trust
Valentine Trust
Wessex Water
West Dorset Mencap

Special Thanks

To the many individuals, businesses and donors who have supported us in different ways by donating their time, resources and expertise.